



TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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Title	(NX70292) Cameron née Champion, Joan Avril (Captain)
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Description	Joan Avril Cameron née Champion as a captain, 2/6 Australian General Hospital, interviewed by Edward Stokes for The Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-45.

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A.

Identification: This is Edward Stokes recording with Joan Cameron of

I was Champion, by the way. I was Champion when I was ... my maiden name.

Right, oh, right. That's important.

Edward Stokes recording with, now Joan Cameron, previously Joan Champion of the 2/6th Hospital. Tape 1, Side 1.

Mrs Cameron could you just perhaps begin by telling us where you were born and where you grew up?

Yes. I was born in the Riverina at Gundagai and I lived there until I was about ten years old and then we moved on to another town. And I eventually went away to boarding school. And when I Will I go on?

Yes, sure.

When I left boarding school I really hadn't any firm and fixed ideas about what I wanted to do. But somehow or other I got on to nursing - the idea, and just My father was very worried about me. He thought, perhaps, that the big city wasn't for me and so I trained in a country town, Goulburn. At the Goulburn District Hospital, I believe it was then. It's since become a base hospital.

Right. That's interesting. And when were you born?

In 1913.

Right. Just a few other things about your formative years, Mrs. Cameron. The ANZAC tradition, what Australian's had done in the first war and so on, was that a very conscious part of your childhood and early womanhood, or not?

Yes, it was, I think. We always had little functions at the primary school where I went to, you know, on ANZAC Day - flag raising ceremonies and things like that, and wreath laying. And my father was in the church. He was an Anglican minister and there was always a mention of that in any church service that was near, and often at, any war memorial, you know, that he might have been conducting or taking part in. So it was always partly, it was always there.

There was a consciousness of it. And the developments in Europe during the second part of the 1930s, Hitler's rise to power. Do you think you were particularly conscious of that, or not?

Well, I don't suppose I was at the beginning but as countries became invaded and taken over, we all, I think, became more and more worried about it, and very much more conscious of it.

Just turning to another thing - your early nursing career. Could you tell us a little bit about your early nursing training and work, the kinds of conditions you trained under, the kind of work you did?

Well, it was a general hospital and we In those days there wasn't a preliminary training school, we were sort of thrown in the deep end, more or less. But you learnt and it was very much a sort of nurse/patient, there was more nurse/patient relationship, I think, in those days. There wasn't so much technical business. We learnt as we trained really, well that sounds silly but I mean it was all experience as we went along and it was absorbed gradually, as it were. And not sort of thrust at us so much from a textbook angle first and try to relate to a patient, you know. We learnt as we went.

Yes, that's obviously very different approach to modern training now. And the backgrounds of most of your contemporary nurses, the young women you were training with, working with. What were their general backgrounds?

Well, I suppose they were mostly country girls, really, because some went to the city but a lot of them came from outlying centres and perhaps further south or west, you know, to Goulburn.

Were they mostly from families where the - in those days obviously the father rather than the mother working - where the father was what you might call a professional - teachers, bank managers, priests such as your father? Or was there a wider spectrum?

Well, I think it was a happy mixture really. A lot of people came from ... a lot of the girls came from farm homes, you know. And some from professional homes, I suppose. I can't really recall, you know, anything special about them.

Right. Well, moving on a little bit to your involvement in the war years. Do you remember the day that war was declared?

Oh, yes. I think we were all ... those who weren't on duty ... were, sort of, hanging over the wireless and, sort of, waiting for the awful You know, it was ... everyone was expecting it and it seemed to be a very imminent, sort of, thing that we were, sort of, you know, expecting.

Was it, thinking back to how it was for you as a young woman, was it all awful news, or was there a tinge of excitement, too?

Well. I think that probably it was a bit mixture of both. We had, at least I had, a very, sort of, nationalistic, sort of, feeling about it, I think. You know, duty calls, sort of thing. But I had finished training and I'd been away and I had done dietetics in Melbourne. And I came back and I was actually Sister Dietician at the time in Bathurst. And I'd just about finished my term as that, and so I just enlisted. I came from a family of three girls and there weren't any sons to, sort of, go off and, sort of, fight the war for us, so I decided I'd be one.

Did your family support the decision?

I think they were a bit alarmed about it, but I think they were quietly proud about it, too.

Right. Well, those early days in the army, obviously a great change from civilian life although I guess in many hospitals there's a degree of discipline and regimentation but still a great jump into a much more

Oh, yes. It was a very different situation, of course, and I suppose sometimes we weren't used to, sort of, army regulations and perhaps we, sort of, did things that, or resented perhaps things that we were made to do. You know, we couldn't do this, we couldn't do that. We couldn't carry handbags except a tiny little sort of thing that we held in our hand.

Were those the things that you resented, the intrusions into your femininity, if you like, or was it other things, too?

Well, it didn't worry me very much, you know, you just, sort of, felt that it was a bit silly, but what they were striving for, I suppose, in dress was uniformity and we were always supposed to be neat and tidy and so on. And this, I think we were. But it was very laid down and it was very, sort of, you know, what matron said sort of thing. But then, of course, that was so even when you were training in those days. You know, you didn't have very much ... you were always sort of strictly under the thumb of the authority.

Was there much drill, parade ground drill, that kind of thing, or were women rather ...?

No, not in camp here in Australia at all.

Well, let's move on to the actual camps. I think after your initial induction you went first to Walgrove and then to Bathurst.

Well, I didn't go to Bathurst. We were split up a bit. Some of us ... some of us started in Liverpool and some started in Walgrove and then the Liverpool women, I think, plus - no, I think the Queensland ones came down much later, just before we embarked - but the Liverpool girls who were in camp there went up to Bathurst. Walgrove girls, there were

only about four or five of us, perhaps six, stayed at Walgrove all the time. I was at Liverpool but I transferred over.

What was your first recollection of some of the key individuals in the hospital, I guess, Rex Money in particular?

(10.00) Well. We didn't see, in my experience, we didn't see so much of Rex after I went from Liverpool to Walgrove because he went up to Bathurst, you see, and I can't recall who was in charge of us at Walgrove. I think, no, we were attached to CCS, that's right, at Walgrove.

Right. Fine. At Walgrove were you doing any, besides the, sort of, basic training in army routines and the rest of that? Was there any further medical training to equip you for, better perhaps, for dealing with the war-time casualties and so on, or not?

No. I don't think so. Out here, of course, it was just very similar in camp hospitals as it was in a big hospital surgery. It was the same as it was, surgical procedures and so on. And new girls got used to working with their officers who perhaps had, they hadn't worked with before. And same with the medical wards.

Right. And during the Walgrove period were you actually doing any medical work, for example, did you have servicemen who were ill in one way or another, who you were caring for?

Oh, yes. There was the usual sort of outbreak of this and that, you know, I can't really recall just what it was but there'd be flu and there'd be, oh, I can't recall, but There wasn't any sandfly fever in Sydney, but, you know, there'd be things like that, that would break out.

Well, of that period before embarkation in the *Queen Mary* do you have any other particular recollections that seem to you significant?

Do you mean significant in a war way or ...?

Significant in the story of your involvement with the 2/6th hospital.

No, I can't recall any, sorry.

Okay. Let's move on to more stirring times down the track. The news of embarkation was fairly sudden, I think, and I don't think you, although there were rumours, you weren't certain where you were going.

No. Well, we never, sort of You just sort of had to live on rumours and never be sure whether they were really going to come to pass or not.

How did you, yourself, feel when you knew you were going overseas?

Well, now you're asking me. How long ago was that? I suppose a sense of excitement. Here we are at last, we're on our way. There's something, you know, there was more meaning to it all. And then, of course, we had to go home on our last leave and we couldn't We had our last leave just before Christmas, our final leave, and then we couldn't go away, we couldn't leave camp at all. We were, I suppose, on twelve hours notice, or something like that. But matron knew, but we weren't told, just when. She knew a lot more about the movements than we ever did. And so But we were allowed, those who were not on duty in the wards, were allowed to go to friends around Sydney, or relations - to spend Christmas with them.

The actual embarkation, or your embarkation on the *Queen Mary*, I think was on Boxing Day although ...

Yes.

... officers and NCOs and people had been on the ship.

Quite a few had been.

Getting things

Including a few sisters, had gone ahead.

What's your memory of that day, actually embarking on this very famous ship?

Well. It had been out before in the harbour taking other troops across before our trip. And we knew it was in harbour and we thought that's probably where we were going. There was a very strong rumour there. We just came down from camp by train to Darling Harbour and then we lined up there. I've got a lovely photo of us all lined up there. I must show it to you later. And then, I think we were taken across by ferries. I can't remember, it's terrible isn't it?

And the accommodation you had on board the ship, how cramped or otherwise was that?

Well, it was still being converted down to when it was when they were carrying ... when the *Queen Mary* was carrying American troops, they had a really tough time, but The swimming pool was still open, that was later closed off and became something or other. And we were accommodated on the sundeck which was absolutely lovely. And about

three of us shared a cabin, I think it was. So that, you know, things weren't too bad going over and the messes were nice. You know, I think we were in the officers' mess. And then they had a sergeants' mess too. I think the gym was open although it had been stripped down a bit. But you know, it was pretty good really.

(15.00) Yes, in your talk that you gave me to read through just a moment, or a while ago, there was a rather lovely story about the pink gins.

Oh, yes. Yes. Well, you see, we weren't supposed to We could have a drink on our own, in our own little sitting room but we weren't supposed to drink in the large officers' lounge. So the men got on to that and Shall I tell you the whole story?

Yes, I think it's well worthwhile.

Well, we used to join them for coffee after dinner and our coffee came along ... our pink gins came along in coffee pots and were poured into little, sort of, demitasse cups. So we had our pink gins with the men.

Did Matron Abbott ever tumble to this?

Well, if she did, she was very good about it and didn't, sort of, say anything at all.

That rule about drinking, incidentally, was that an army regulation, or was that her personal ...?

I'm not too sure but I think probably it was her idea of, well, keeping control and, sort of, making sure that we were all okay.

Sure. How much general contact was there between nurses and officers, NCOs, socially on the ship, and perhaps generally later on, too?

Well. There were deck sports and then there was very often dancing at night. And then, of course, we had New Year's Eve on board, too, which was quite a gala affair. But the captain ... and we sort of were invited to the captain's cabin, you know, for drinks occasionally. He, sort of, took us by groups as it were. But, oh, yes, there was quite a bit of, sort of, intermingling.

So things weren't really very rigidly drawn?

Oh, no, no.

Right.

We couldn't We didn't see very much of other ranks and the sergeants and so on, you know, but we saw the officers themselves. And the ships officers and the nurses all shared the same sort of things to do.

Right. Moving on a little bit, I know the *Queen Mary* did, was in convoy and ... which was rather frustrating because of its ability to travel faster and so on.

Yes. It was much, yes, the captain used to be very frustrated because we had to ... we had to keep up to the, at least we had to peg down, to the slowest one in the convoy. And I think that might have been the *Awatea*, was it? [inaudible] Anyway, the *Awatea* was having rough time going down the south coast after we left Sydney and was sort of bucketing up and down, you know, like this and the captain sent a message to us: 'Keep on following in mother's footsteps'. But, you know, we used to have fun like that.

Nice rivalry between ships. Moving on a little bit, we might skate over the later part of the sea voyage because perhaps more significant things to talk about. I know you did trans ship into a smaller ship. I have gathered that was rather, some people have said, more comfortable than the bigger *Queen Mary*.

Yes. Well, I expect it was how you were situated on the *Queen Mary*, you know. We were very comfortable, of course, and had no complaints at all. I can't just remember where our hospital was on the, but we did have, you know, for hospital sicknesses and so on - tooth aches and boils and things like that. And we had to staff that. But I can't just remember where in the ship it was. The other ships that we transferred onto after Trincomalee were British. Did I say that in my notes? The British/India transport, you know, special ones.

It says they were purpose built for the job.

They were built for the tropics and transports and so on.

On both ships when you were doing your nursing, was that a few hours a day, or did you work occasional days, how did that work out?

Oh, no. Well, just a few hours, you know, the normal shift that you would do if you were on land. And it didn't come round very often because there were so many of us and we all took a turn at it.

Right. Well, moving on a little bit. Arriving in the Middle East must, I imagine, have been quite exciting, certainly very different.

Well, yes. Going through the Suez Canal, of course, was very exciting and a first-off experience for most of us I suppose.

I understand, during it you were delayed going through the canal by

Well, some of us were. I was on one of the first through, I think, but some of my friends who were You see we were deployed after Trincomalee onto ... some, a group of medical people with sisters on each ship. And some of them were delayed by a raid on the canal which You know, they knew there were bombs in the canal and so they had to sit in the Beda Lakes for two or three days. And that, I believe was interesting because it was wonderful to watch them retrieving the bombs out of the canal, the unexploded bombs that they knew were dropped.

(20.00) That's interesting. I do know that when you did finally disembark, there was a rather lovely story that I think is well worth repeating of the collapse of military etiquette.

Yes. Well, of course, we all had wonderful farewell parties the night before so I suppose we were all suffering slightly, the next day. But we were lined up by one of our captains who was a young medical officer and he didn't know very much about the niceties of drill and so on. So he marched us off and he was busily, sort of, looking after and seeing that we all got down off the gangplank and he wasn't down ahead of us to give us the right-wheel or the left-wheel or And so being good soldiers we just, sort of, walked straight on ahead, although we knew we doing a terrible thing, in that we went straight through, what would you call it?

A contingent?

A parade thing ... a changing of the guard on the wharf by a very superior guard officer and his men, guardsmen. And he was trying to, sort of, give his orders to them and we walked - marched - straight through with no eyes right, left, sort of thing, just straight on and I think that the guards' officer's face was a sight to behold, but never mind, we just pressed on and I felt very sorry for the medical officer who was in charge of us.

Coming along like a dog at the back.

Yes. Face.

Well, going on after disembarkation, I think it was Gaza Ridge where you first went to, and this was a tented camp.

Yes.

What was life like in tents?

Oh, well, you know. We had those - are they E.P.I.P. tents - the four and the one? We each had a corner and we all thought it was a big experience and we were rather intrigued

by it. Slit trenches handy were dug, you know, were dug handy outside so that we could dive into them. I don't think we ever had to very much. No, not at all in Gaza Ridge. But we had our big trunks. I think I told you the story of that further on, of the trunks anyway. We had those trunks with us and they were marvellous sort of bedside tables as it were and our little camp stretchers. And we'd all got our sleeping bags and so on, you know. And we had those, sort of, material wardrobey things which we could, sort of, hang on the guy ropes and things round about. And we made it very homely and nice. And we soon found a place in Gaza where we could buy rush mats and things like that, or even woven mats, and put them down on the floor. Except when the wretched, oh, there was some animal there that was always burrowing up and making a mess of our floorings.

That's interesting, actually coming up in the middle of the tent?

Yes. Quite often. You never knew whether they'd appear there or outside, you know. But, I've forgotten, but I can find out from Peter if you want to, sort of stop, I've forgotten the name of the animal.

I don't think the actual name matters. You can imagine the scene, sort of a middle eastern wombat.

Yes.

Right. While you were at Gaza for this first time ... of course there was, although the 2/1st hospital had been there ... the 2/6th was not actually working. And I think you did no medical work at all, is that correct?

Practically none. Some of us we used in the wards for, you know, if some of the staff were sick or something and we could fill in. But I don't recall doing anything much at all. We had our own line duties, you know, and someone would be on mess duty and someone else would be seeing that the laundry duties were, you know, we had Arab laundries in the camp. And we had to make sure that our laundry got away safely. So there was always someone like that on duty. And then somebody else would look after the lines and go round this and, you know, general sort of duties like that, but not any actual nursing as I recall. I wasn't called on to do anything.

I think you were saying in the talk, Mrs Cameron, that partly to fill in time perhaps, to boost morale, there was quite a lot of route marching and this again degenerated into something of a joke?

(25.00) Oh, well. Yes. This was our CO again, who thought that we musn't get, sort of, slack and out of muscle tone and all that sort of thing and so he thought that while we weren't working it was much better for us to be fully occupied marching around. So, I think, a notice went up on the board, I suppose he saw the matron first and then she put up a notice on the board that we were all to assemble at 1000 hours, yes. I've forgotten the terms. Anyway, about ten o'clock in the morning and then we were route marched

off. And there was usually an officer or an NCO in charge of us, whoever was available. And then after a while we found it terribly dull and tedious and we got sort of sick of the whole thing. So we appealed for a drum or something, you know, or something to keep us in step and that was a great help. But I think that the 2/1st sisters who were off duty and would see us marching off past the road wondered what on earth the war was coming to, I suppose.

Shemozzle of women [inaudible]

But we had a lot of fun doing it and we turned it into a joke. It was all we could do when we marched along and it probably kept us very fit. And all the boys passing in the convoys used to say, 'Hi' and pass rude remarks to us and we'd throw a few back to them.

Sounds fun.

But I think that fell by the way after a while. Probably then, you know, some of us were called on to work in the 2/1st lines and tents, wards and so on.

Right. Well, of course, it wasn't long after you'd been there that news came to pack up.

Well, yeah. The big rumour flew around that we were going somewhere but no-one quite knew where.

Do you remember how much time you had to pack? How ...? And also how much ...? Were you packing medical equipment, or was that all still boxed up from Australia?

No, the quartermaster stores had everything to do. All we had to do was pack ourselves and our own belongings.

And was that true, incidentally, in other moves the hospital made later? For example, back to Australia, that all the medical equipment was packed up by the quartermaster people.

Yes. We never had anything to do with it. I suppose the nursing staff in the theatres probably had, you know ... well, they probably had to pack it there, within the theatre, but then it was eventually put into, I don't know what, crates and whatever and

Right, so you were just doing the initial

Yeah. So we never had to do anything like that.

Right. I do know from some other people that on route to Alexandria that the hospital was staged through a transit camp. I think it was Amiriya¹, a very bleak miserable place. Did you go there, or did you go directly to Alexandria?

I think we went straight through. You should turn that off for a while I think.

Well, you were saying in fact you went directly by train to Suez and then Alexandria. I understand you had a week or so in Alexandria to fill in.

Yes. It seemed as though, we didn't know at the time, but apparently we missed our transport across to Greece and so we had to, we were quartered in a hotel, I don't think it was a very highly rated one. But it was clean and it was nice and we were perfectly happy and comfortable there. And apart from reporting three times a day to matron we were able to explore the city which was very nice and, you know.

Was it easy for women to do that kind of exploring on their own, or not?

It was in those days. I wouldn't like to try it now, but we never went alone. There was always two or three of us. And the natives were beginning to get a bit peculiar, they sometimes called us: 'Hi, Mrs Simpson', things like that because of the royal family troubles, you know, before the war. But never really were they a pest. Sometimes the boys would hang around, 'Backsheesh, backsheesh', you know, but you could usually cope with that. And the shopkeepers and so on were very good. They were only too pleased to, sort of, see a bit of custom, I suppose. And we used to explore and look at all the nice things. There were a lot of Is the tape going on?

Yes.

Yes. We had, you know, there were a lot of nice French shops and things. Well, they weren't French shops but they had French goods, beautiful sort of bead work and embroidery work that you could do and tapestry and so on. So it was all very interesting.

That's fine.

END TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Mrs Cameron, 2/6th Hospital, Tape 2 [sic], Side 2.

Well going on. The journey over to Greece, I know you disembarked at Piraeus on 3rd April. The men of the hospital had already gone north. I

¹ El Amiriya

understand there were some fears that things really might degenerate pretty quickly, and therefore the women were kept back in Athens. Is that correct?

Yes, that's so. We were quartered in different hotels and things right in Athens to begin with, and just awaited further orders. And our time was our own. Again we were reporting three times daily to matron to find out if we were ... had to do, you know, pack and get on with it. But I think our officers felt it was pretty dicey and they didn't want us to go up until they were established and working. And it being a smaller hospital than most. What was it? 600 beds, I think, wasn't it, or 5?

I'm not sure at that stage.

Yes. It was smaller it was about half the size of the big base hospitals and therefore it was going north, closer to the field ambulances. And so they wanted to get it ready and they really felt that it was Well, Germany hadn't declared war on Greece at that stage and their embassies were open. But they must have been highly delighted to see all our movements about, I suppose really.

Yes, sure.

But anyway, we were there. And then we were moved out to Kifisia which is a very nice summer resort of the more wealthy Greeks. They had their, what do you call 'em, their houses out there anyway. And this was on the way to Mount Pendelikon where all the beautiful marble came from that was in the Greek statues.

I think the move to Kifisia, from your notes at least, was after the Germans declared war, and after the bombing of

Not quite, I don't think.

Were you in Athens when Piraeus was bombed?

Yes, yes. We were there then.

And when the munition ship ...?

And you'll probably get a wonderful story of that from Mrs Tomlinson. She has a very amusing story to tell about that. It wasn't very amusing at the time, but it's funny in retrospect.

Could we just pause a moment?

Yes. Right. [Pause.] Anyway, we heard all the terrible banging and so on, you know, that went on. And we wondered what on earth had happened but we didn't hear because it

was kept very quiet. It was quite a few hours before we heard what had really happened. And actually a couple of our men had been killed down there while they were working at an RAP, helping unload, I think. True?

Yes, I was talking to Charlie Cross yesterday, who was down there unloading and he told me about some of that.

But we didn't hear about that as early as the men would have, you see.

During this period at Athens and later when you moved out to Kifisia, I think you had quite a lot of time to explore.

Yes, we did, mm.

Was that enjoyable?

Well, it was because, I think, Athens, well it was then and probably still is a beautiful little city. And the light was absolutely fantastic. No wonder people, artists went there in droves to paint. It was a fantastic light, hard to explain.

Very clear.

Yes, yes, and shining on all those fabulous old ruins, you know. It was marvellous.

How much frustration was there amongst the nurses that you were, for whatever reason, unable to get on and actually do any nursing?

(5.00) Well. I think there was to a certain degree but then, of course, it was all so new and interesting and so on that we all found plenty to occupy our minds and we didn't I suppose underneath it all we felt a bit frustrated that we weren't getting on with the job, but we weren't sort of chewing our fingernails down to the elbows as it were, I don't think.

There were other things to fill your time?

Yes.

There was a note in your book, Mrs Cameron, that the, at one point, the 2/6th nurses were offered to help in a British hospital.

Yes.

But that was refused. Was that because they simply didn't need you? Or was there some niggling rivalry there?

Well, I think that the QAs, the British nurses and their matrons were very proud, they didn't really want to admit, I suppose, that they couldn't cope. But the casualties were coming back thick and fast by this time and they weren't able to cope. They just didn't have enough room and a lot of the casualties were left lying in the corridors on the stretchers, the ambulance stretchers, you know. And we used to go over there visiting and we sometimes were able to, sort of, say, talk to the boys and get them a drink of water or something like that. But our actual nursing help, I don't think was accepted as such. I know matron was rather distressed, our matron was rather distressed about it because she couldn't get through to the matron of the British hospital that we were there and we could help and so on.

That's interesting. Well, when you said you went over there visiting did you mean visiting wounded men just to comfort them and so on?

Yes. Well, we felt that this was perhaps something that we could do - contact - particularly when that there they were, you know, there wasn't enough British staff to cope with it all at the time. And I don't suppose it was going on like that all the time but it was ... by the time we were told to evacuate Athens and get out, you know, they were really hard pressed, I think. But all we could do was go over and talk to the boys and sort of be of some, sort of, comfort and take addresses and things like that, you know. Perhaps we can get in touch with your people, or something, you know, anything like that that we felt was useful.

Well, moving on a little bit. Things did degenerate very quickly and I think it was the 20th that you were given your first evacuation order, although in fact for you yourself it didn't work out. I think the story was that there were two truck loads and the second truck load didn't quite make it?

Well. We were still getting there when we were stopped and the order was to turn round and go back to our billets.

You were going to Piraeus?

We were going to Piraeus to join the hospital ship but we didn't know. We didn't know where we were going. We just did what we were told. We never really quite knew what was going on. So we were loaded into these open trucks and we went through the streets of Athens and all the people cheered us and we felt so awful because we knew that we were being taken away, you know, somehow or somewhere we were going to leave Greece. And they didn't realise, they thought we were just, sort of, moving to another spot or something. Well, that's how we felt and we felt very sad but ... because at that stage we came to admire the Greece and their fortitude - the Greeks I should say and their fortitude very strongly. We thought it was ... they were pretty marvellous people.

In all this story of the evacuation, do you think things would have been better for yourselves if you had had clearer indications of where you were going?

No, I don't think so. It didn't really, you know We'd been in the army long enough then to be aware of the fact that if you did what you were told without questioning you were usually looked after very well. You might be uncomfortable, or it might be inconvenient to your own personal thing but the fact that you were part of a group that was being organised and you were prepared to, sort of, go along with it and just say, 'Well, yes, okay, this is what we have to do.'

To flow with the [inaudible].

(10.00) Yes. It just seemed to be And I think that if we had had more to do with our own, we probably would have all been going off in all directions, you know. It was much better. I don't know how well it was organised but to us it seemed to be the best they could do at the time and with the things that they had.

Sure. Well, of course, after missing the hospital ship because of that air raid when it rapidly departed, you went back to Kifisia, I think in the last day or two there you could in fact hear fighting in the distance?

Oh, well, we could hear, I suppose, they were aerial attacks ahead of the troops but I remember seeing, looking over to the west, the setting sun one day, it was probably the day before we left and I could actually see a Stucka or something bombing a machine gun post on a side of a mountain. I could see them doing that against the setting sun. And we heard the crump of shells, you know.

Right. I think it was on the 23rd that you got a second order to evacuate but this time things were more desperate and you could only take hand baggage?

Yes, that's right. Actually our own trunks had gone all the way up to Volos Harbour and we never saw them from the time we left Palestine to the time we got back and that was sheer good luck but that's another story, I guess, later on. We had to ... we couldn't take ... we had a kit-bag with us and we had a little suitcase and some of us carried travelling cushions with pockets in them, you know, that we could keep things in. And we had overcoats and we had - it was wintery time, about April, wasn't it, I think and, it was cold, or was it cold Spring, can't remember. Anyway we had to empty as much out of our kit-bags as we possibly could and, of course, being Australians I suppose we thought, well, we can manage. We'll take as much as we possibly can. We told that we could take what we could handle ourselves, that was our order.

Can I just pause a moment there? You said being Australians you thought you could carry as much ...

Well, I

What were the underlying attitudes then?

I didn't really mean that we were stronger than most people but we, I think, we were more ... I think we were just a more, sort of, individualistic race, don't you? It seems to me we have a lot more initiative than a lot of people, most of us anyway. And we thought, well, if we've been told we can take as much as we can manage we'll do just that. So some of us, the ones who felt that they couldn't hump a lot only had kit-bags that were about, they had about that much in them. Mine had about that much. And it was silly really because in the end I did have to abandon it. But still

Still you'd made the attempt.

Yes, yes.

I think initially you were to be evacuated by train but the train lines were blown up and then began this very harrowing journey by truck, not in fact knowing whether or not you'd get across the Corinth Canal before it was taken.

Yes, yes. That was a very strong rumour that the paratroops would probably beat us to that. So we sort of sat up in the back of the truck, not being able to see, we were all hunch... as troops often do, we were looking out the back, you see, in these covered trucks, I've forgotten what they were called but they were We had English drivers and they were British army trucks and

And this was at night too I think.

And that was at night and Oh, yes, it was after dark. And there were a tremendous lot of people hurrying from Athens, clogging the roads and we learnt afterwards that our drivers took a wrong turning and had to go back, but we didn't know any of this. We just sat up and hoped that, you know, they knew where they were going and we waited with baited breath to see where we'd go. But I remember us crawling, having to wait quite a while and then crawling along very carefully with these blacked out headlights. And I looked out the back and I noticed that we were ... the sea was down there and I gathered that the mountain was up there, sort of thing. And it actually was the old coast road which, of course, now has been superseded and they have this lovely motorway higher up. But this was the only way out that we knew of, out from Athens and down to the Corinth Canal.

There must have been a lot of destruction along the road. I think in your talk ...

Yes.

... you mentioned dead donkeys and ...

Yes.

... this kind of thing. And you go on to talk about the fearful waste of war. What did you mean by that?

(15.00) Well. First of all it ... creeping round this thing, the Germans had attacked this road knowing it was the main escape route down to the south. They'd bombed it and, you know, all the time and of course dead donkeys were around the place and we were just, sort of, creeping around The Pioneers, I suppose, or someone were trying to fill in the roads as fast as we were, sort of ... as fast as they were bombed. And we were creeping round these places and it was pretty dicey, you know. But after we got over the Corinth Canal and we had a comfort stop which was very amusing because there were, sort of, pencil pines everywhere which [inaudible] however we all managed somehow. But then we got going and we could see then the fearful waste of war, I thought, with all our trucks and lorries and, you know, all that sort of gear that was just driven into the fields and riddled with machine gun bullets so that it wouldn't be any use to the Germans. Because they knew they couldn't take it off, back to Africa with them.

Must have been a great contrast with the beauty ...

Well, it was.

... the beauty of Greece.

Because it was a glorious day and there we were going along, you wouldn't have thought there was a war on till suddenly we all came to a standstill and they said, 'Everybody out'. And apparently there was a lone raider about.

Yes, I was going to ask you about this. This is when you were off lying in some barley fields, I think.

Yes.

How did you feel with that plane coming down on you?

Well, we knew it would sort of strafe the convoy rather than pick us up but we felt that they must have been able to see us with these few, sort of, half grown and rather sparsely filled barley fields, the stalks, sort of, here and there. And I've never felt so long, lying straight, I never felt so long in all my life and I wasn't really quite sure where I ought to put my tin hat. But they didn't strafe us in the barley field but they did, sort of, shoot up the convoy a bit but they weren't very ... it was only a single plane. And the only casualty

out of that was not from the plane itself, or the gunner, but one of the trucks in its haste to pull up and let the girls out went over into a ditch I think and They were New Zealand sisters, I think, in that and they, one of them, one or two of them had a casualty. I think someone had a broken arm or something.

Right, but not

Nothing major.

Not major?

No, no.

One of the interesting things, I thought, in your notes for the speech, Mrs Cameron, was the point about tea. Tea somehow miraculously appeared at the right moments to cheer people up.

Yes.

Were you every conscious of who was doing it, or ...?

No, not really. It was probably a field kitchen with the troops who were, you know, there were troops in the convoy too. And somehow or other it just appeared.

Well, the other really remarkable thing, I think. It was quite unbelievable of this incredible, sort of, one would assume reasonably chaotic situation, later that day, I think, you finally reached a cemetery where you rested up. And there you were delivered with your mail.

Yes. We'd only had about one mail, if we'd had that, all the time we'd been in Athens and here along came the CO and the quartermaster with a wonderful box of, you know, a collection of mail about two or three lots. And, I've forgotten how many letters I had. And we all had a pile of letters so it was a wonderful thing to be able to sit round or lie round amongst the tombstones and things and read our mail. It passed the time very nicely. It was a wonderful place for us to be really. It was a clever spot to pick because there were a lot of native pines growing in amongst the graves and there was a chapel up in one corner and behind that chapel were all the, sort of, necessary conveniences so it was all very good. But the quartermaster brought us a box of prunes which was ... none of us felt we needed at that time ... but apart from that, you know

You were saying with the quartermaster, the CO was there by that did you mean, Colonel Money?

Yes, I think he turned up on that day. But we didn't see him for very long and he was ahead with the other troops somewhere or other.

So there were generally moving down

He had apparently heard we coming through and he came back from where ever he was. He was further south I think.

Did he, do you remember him saying anything to you?

Well, he didn't come round to all of us. He spoke to matron and the 2IC I think who was with us and No matron wasn't with us

Colonel Pierce. No, I was going to say, she was on the ship.

The 2IC and a couple of the senior sisters, he spoke to, but didn't go round us all.

Well, from there on you went to Navplion

Yes.

I think.

Yes, this was the cemetery outside Argos.

And the journey to, I think it's pronounced Naplion [sic]?

Navplion.

There were British army officers along the route

Yes.

Generally keeping order and keeping silence.

(20.00) Yes. Of course, this was in the middle of the night, too. You see, we spent all day in the cemetery and then we had orders. See, we'd all been issued with our own rations before we left Athens so that was how we fed ourselves - on bully beef and biscuits - and the odd cup of tea that came around. And then, I forgotten what time of the night, but well and truly in the dark, we took off again in lorries until they said, 'Well, this is as far as we go. You march now.' And no matter what you said, 'Where are we marching to?', 'Oh, you'll find out, just keep on going', you know. So there were English officers all along the way and they'd been told that we weren't to take any luggage at all and I was on a group, on the outside of a group of three and the officers were on this side. And whilst my friends sidled by I had to do all the arguing about my kit-bag. And in the end after three stops and losing contact with my friends and getting further and further back in the line, I said, 'Oh, blast it', you know, just sort of took my keys out and unlocked the

padlock, got out a clean blouse and threw the rest in the ditch. And it was much better then - going. And the others were still hugging onto what they had. Some were hugging it like this and some were, over their shoulders and some were dragging it, and you know. But I had a travelling cushion and I'd been able to stuff a few things into the pocket of it. So I had that and, of course, we wore our greatcoats even - whether we needed them or not. It was the best way to carry them and you never knew what - whether you really would want them. So I was ... and they said, 'Oh, Champ, what on earth happened to you?' you know d-d-d-d-d. So I said, 'Well, I had to throw my kit-bag away in the end. I was sick of arguing and I was losing contact with you'. But I said, 'Never mind, I've got a clean blouse'. And I looked down and it was a silky blouse and it had fallen off my arm so I didn't even have that.

That must have been a bleak disappointment.

I was furious, absolutely furious. I thought that was the stone end, you know. And I was more upset about losing that blouse than the kit-bag.

It's often the small things, isn't it? Still, needless to say, I assume you didn't think for a moment of going back ...

Oh, no.

... to look

So we found ourselves eventually on a wharf, and there we sat and wondered what next. And all we were told was that we musn't talk, make no sound at all. And so we sat there whispering to each other and wondering what

Who was going to hear?

Well, I don't know, spies, you know, Fifth Columnists, so on.

Yeah.

So Yes, well you never knew who was listening in and who was reporting what in those days.

And I think there was an Australian destroyer, the *Voyager* ...?

Yes. Yes, well, eventually a Greek caique, a fishing vessel, came up and we were told to board it. So we got on board that still didn't know quite what was ... what the end of that would be. But they took us out into the middle of the harbour and suddenly there we found ourselves alongside a destroyer which turned out to be the *Voyager*. And we were told to line up at two different points on the caique - fore and aft, and they had

corresponding receiving points on the destroyer and it was a little bit rough, you know, we were going like this a bit - to and fro.

And I think there was one lucky escape here?

Yes. Well, we were, sort of, lined up here and I was next to go across, I think, and I heard a bit of a muffled, you know, sort of - well, it was a shout but it was a cry, I suppose, and we looked along and we could just, sort of, see that one of the girls had gone down, tin hat and all on her head. But quick as a flash one of the sailors from the *Voyager* jumped over to hold her up and the others, sort of, slid across holding onto the rope stanchion ... they, sort of, slid across and braced their legs against the two ships so that they didn't come together and she was quickly hauled up again, none the worse for wear but very wet. But that was marvellous really. A few troops also were with us and they went on board so that the poor destroyer was absolutely overrun by everyone who wasn't part of the crew. And we were everywhere. We were in the ward room, we were in the gun turrets, we were on the deck, we were anywhere we could fit.

I gather ... and there was obviously a very warm reception.

(25.00) Oh, yes, yes. And we heard afterwards, you know, about the ... well, after we got going, that's right, some signals were sent between ... somebody said ... we found there were other destroyers picking up other troops at other points, I suppose. And one signalled to the other, 'What cargo have you got?'. 'A hundred and something women', and he said, 'Wow!', you know, came back then.

It must have been a delight for these long at sea sailors.

Yes. They were thrilled. But anyway, it was marvellous really and we were very tired but they rustled us up, you know, hot drinks as soon as we came aboard and the next morning I slept under the ward room table that night but some of them were in the gun turrets and everywhere they could, sort of, fit. And there came a daylight raid in the next morning, round about breakfast time and one of the sailors, ratings I suppose, in the gun turrets, said to one of the girls there, 'Here Sis, stir this porridge will you, I've got to pass up the shells', you know. And so that sort of thing was going on

They were actually cooking in the turret?

Yeah, I think so. Well, you see, there were so many on board they had various cooking points all over the place, I think.

Sure. I guess they might have them in the turrets to cook food for long actions, anyway.

Yeah, yeah.

The actual journey to Crete was, I think, uneventful, is that right?

Yes. It was fascinating being on the destroyer because they zigzagged but they weren't put in convoy, you see, they were their own thing, doing their own thing, and it was like being in a huge speedboat. It literally sat down, they went at full speed and it sat down at the stern and you just went jjjjjjjj... like this you know.

It must have been very exhilarating?

Oh, it was, yes. I think we had a couple of raids but they were mostly lone raiders and spy planes, I think, seeing what was going on. A few depth charges were dropped. We were all right, though. We got on to Crete then.

Right. Well, at Crete near Souda Bay I think there was the 7th British Hospital.

Yes.

Now, you had a few days there, just generally resting up and so on, I think?

Yes, we did at first and then we were called on to help them establish their wards until the rest of, you know, they were I suppose they were an advance party of the 7th British establishing their tent hospital there and we were making up beds and things. And the first night, I think, we slept there. Did I say that in the story?

I can't quite remember that detail, Mrs Cameron.

Anyway. Do you want to stop now? No?

I thought we might just talk for a minute till the end of the Crete period.

Yes.

And then

Well. We And the next time, I think some walking wounded came in and so we didn't sleep in the wards then, we slept out under the stars. And it was fascinating because the end of the winter snows were still on the mountains and yet it was, sort of, spring in the air where we were. And we had been able to have our first wash after leaving Athens, when we first arrived by going into the sea and just, sort of, washing our clothes and everything in the salt water, hair and all. But it was wonderful sleeping out in the stars, you know, because it was exhilarating, it was not so much exhilarating but, you know, the coolness of the snow and yet the warmth of the earth around us was ... it was fascinating.

Sounds really very beautiful. And besides those three days helping set up the British hospital there was really no other nursing you could do there?

No, not really. We had nothing, no equipment with us or anything. You see, we'd ... our hospital equipment had all been left behind in Volos. And the, well, I've forgotten just when, but at some stage then we were moved to an old, an abandoned orphanage, or somewhere and we were sleeping on the floor of it. This must have been after we'd left the hospital, and you know, there was nothing much to do. We went down to the hospital to see if we could do anything and we used to mess with them, I think. I can't quite remember what we ate on Crete.

Right. Well, we might move on a little bit from there because that's a very, very vivid account of all those experiences in Greece and so on. But the journey on from Crete to Alexandria, I think, was fairly uneventful, wasn't it, by comparison?

Yes, it was, apart from the fact that we were ... it was a pretty old, dirty old Greek tub that we were in, that I was in, anyway, with my group. And I think we were all, the Australian nurses, were all together on this one and it was pretty grim. And the, I don't know whether they were, Cretans or Greeks were, they were frightened anyway, they didn't want to stay on as ship's crew. And so when we got to Crete, I think they all abandoned ship and took to the mountains and so on. So that

END TAPE 1, SIDE 2

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

We finally got to Alexandria and then we were quartered, we were given a meal on the wharf and then we were quartered with the one of the British hospitals again. Um, can't remember ... just outside Alexandria. And we had very little clothes, very few clothes, you see, so we used to stay in the morning and do our washing and then - and iron it, dry it and iron it, and then go out when all the ... [laughs] when the people, the inhabitants or residents of Cairo were having their noon day rest - 'mad dogs and Englishmen' and it was Australians. We used to go out and sightsee then and do our thing and then we'd come back and But this was the only way we could manage. But we stayed there, I think, until we finally were issued with clothes and things and our own baggage and so on. And then we were off and away back to Gaza Ridge by train.

That's fascinating. And that's a remarkable story. Well, I think we should have a pause here, there's a natural break.

Well, do you want to hear about the trunks, never saw the trunks ...?

This is just continuing on. After you left Alexandria you went back to Gaza Ridge, I think?

Yes. And we'd been there about a week or ten days, I suppose, and suddenly our trunks turned, that we had never since we left Gaza. And it was a fascinating story. Apparently they went right up to Vo Harbour - Volos Harbour and sat on the wharf there the whole time. And someone outside the hospital, a transport officer bringing back a load of empty trucks from north to south of Greece, saw them You'll have to turn it off.

Well, he could see our names on them because it was emblazoned on them, of course, and what we belonged to, no our army numbers that right. And he thought, well, will I or won't I load them on and bring them back. And the story is that he actually tossed a coin and the trunks won, so he loaded them on and brought them back and somehow or other they got on a transport and came across to Alexandria and eventually to Gaza, and there they were. They'd never been opened from the time they'd left Gaza Ridge.

That's amazing. The logistics of armies moving themselves around.

Amazing.

Incredible.

This is continuing afterwards. Well, Mrs. Cameron after the wonderful arrival of your baggage the hospital set up at Gaza, I think, at a place called Kilo 89 where there had been another hospital. Do you remember the general physical set up of that hospital, or not?

I can't remember ever being at Kilo 89. I know it was just next door but we were only at Gaza Ridge ever, I think. Below. We set up a hospital on Gaza Ridge below the lines of the of the 1st - 2/1st AGH which was, sort of, higher up than us.

I see. Right. Well, do you remember the general physical set up of the hospital at Gaza Ridge?

Um. I think at this stage they'd built quite a few huts and it was no longer a tent hospital. Some of them were still in tents.

Some of the wards?

Some of the wards were still in tents but a lot of them were under thing And they had also built proper lines for accommodation for the sisters. We were no longer in tents we were in single rooms in a long line of single rooms in a hut.

With a private ... an actual private room?

We shared, of course, our own ablutions block. But apart from that

That must have been quite a change?

Yes, it was.

Well, of course, it was there too that you really could settle down to do some ...

Yes, some proper work.

... some consistent nursing.

Yes.

That must have been quite a joy?

(5.00) Yes. At this stage, though, I can't really remember whether this was after we came back from Jerusalem or after the Syrian campaign, or whether it was ... we got established before. I know we were established well and truly with the 2/1st on the same hill. It wasn't a hill really, you know, it was just a sand dune.

I think, well according to my notes, you were reasonably well established before the Syrian campaign.

Yes.

Do you have memories of the wounded coming down from Syria and so on?

Only to Jerusalem. I don't think we ever got any from, down at Gaza Ridge, from the Syrian campaign. It may have gone down to the 2/3rd but, of course, we were up in Jerusalem then. And we handled most of, well, we kept most of what came back to us, and we nursed them there.

Let's perhaps move on to the - just a moment - to the Mount Scopus period - that was October '41. Mount Scopus was very different to any of the other establishments that the hospital had, just in terms of its facilities. What do you remember about the building?

Oh, we were entranced when we, sort of, drew up outside this beautiful building which was all stone. And we learnt later it was the Kaiser's palace which the Kaiser built from

the first world war. Built it for his, um, Kaiserina, I think she's called. But they never ever got there. And so it had ... I don't what it had been before on Mount Scopus but certainly it was a British hospital when we took over. And I don't know where they marched on to, but we certainly stayed there all during the Syrian campaign.

Could you describe a typical ward in the hospital for us, in terms of its ... what it was built of, how well it was equipped, how comfortable it was, and so on?

Well, this is a bit difficult because the nursing I did there was again in tent hospitals because most of the surgical wards were within this lovely stone building itself. It was just like a lovely old castle with tiled stone floors. And our living accommodation was there and our messing and our, you know, general things. In fact we looked out, we were on top of the ridge of Mount Scopus and we looked out from our mess windows across the Dead Sea to the mountains of Mohab. So we had a beautiful view there and a lovely old garden. But my actual nursing was again in tents because I was a medical sister and I looked after diphtheria cases and various, you know, various medical things, in the gardens. And then there were others who were nursing in tents again, across the road, you know, looking after some other It was very big. The castle couldn't accommodate the whole thing.

Right. I was going to ask you both as regards yourself and perhaps what you recall of other nurses too. Did nurses ... did you yourself first of all, did you work for long periods in one kind of ward or did you circulate around different kinds of wards - medical, surgical, different medical wards, etcetera?

Well, I think so. Perhaps people who were senior, most senior ones who were, sort of, in charge perhaps, stayed more, for longer periods in one ward than others. Some of us had to do night duty and some of us were on night duty on wards. And I remember doing a stint when I had to go round every ward. I was the, sort of, senior sister reporting on night duty.

Keeping an overall eye on

And I was the one that had to report to matron the next day from all the wards, you see, so I used to have to write a report and read the ward reports as well. That was just once, but I wasn't doing that all the time. Other times I was just being an ordinary sister in a ward. And, you know, you didn't have junior nurses underneath you, I don't think we had any VAs at all in Jerusalem, but not sure about that, I'm sorry.

Well, I think they did, actually, according to my notes, they did come along ...

Did they do a bit?

... during that period. Just a moment. So in the nursing hierarchy, Mrs Cameron, you were at this stage a relatively senior nurse?

Yes. Well, I had, we had bands there, before we got ... and I had a slightly senior job because I had another, you know, I'd done dietetics at that stage, and I expect that's how I got my extra stripe.

(10.00) Perhaps if we could just have a brief diversion here to talk about status, rank and so on. Were men, men in the ranks, were they particularly conscious do you think of the status of the nurses as officers, by this stage, or not? Was there a social divide there because of that?

Well, I suppose there was, particularly with the other ranks who were just orderlies, I suppose. In a way they perhaps resented the fact that they had to work with female officers. But, um, you know, they probably joined up thinking they'd be in field ambulances and just have officers, medical officers and have more responsibility themselves. But it wasn't all that obvious. Mostly we worked well together, I think.

And between male officers and nurses, was there a real acceptance of nurses as true officers, or did they ...? Was there always a feeling that, in a sense, you were perhaps, say, we could say, pseudo officers?

Well, I suppose this could come into it more, not so much in the actual nursing and, you know, working part of it, but perhaps in the social ... I don't know, um.... To me it just seemed like a normal medical officer/sister/nurse relationship, you know, in the wards.

Right. Well, if we can just go back to the actual nursing for a moment. Let's say, take a particular ward, you were saying before that you worked for quite some time in a diphtheria ward. What would a ... could you describe a typical day, for us, in the wards? The routines that were involved.

Much the same as you would at home, you know, in an ordinary hospital.

Well, um, perhaps can ...?

I find that difficult, I'm sorry.

Yes. I know what you mean.

Although you were a trained sister, you really, sort of, did ... well, they had orderlies I guess, men orderlies who did the work of the ... what in ordinary civilian hospitals, your junior nurses would do. Like panning and bottling and all that sort of thing, you know. But, well, you'd come on and you'd do a round and ask everyone how, what sort of a night

they'd had and you'd read your report and you'd see that the ... you'd serve the meals, I suppose, with the assistance of the orderlies. Golly, it's so hard to remember. And then you'd do rounds with the officer doctor who came along and

Prescribing medicines and that kind of thing?

Well, he ... yes, and you'd hand out the medicines and so on.

Right. How much besides fairly professional medical contact with the patients, how much general social contact was there with patients in hospital, between nurses and patients? I don't mean so much in bedside talk which I'm sure there would be a lot of, but going a little bit beyond that, taking people outside, excursions, that kind of thing.

No. I think that Red Cross, of course, was over there, you know, and they would see to a lot of that, I think. There weren't very many excursions as I remember. But people came to the hospital. Entertainment, you know, entertainers. We had this concert, as I say, and we had And who would have arranged that, I don't know. Was there a community? We just took these for granted. We were busy with our own duties and we'd suddenly see a notice on the board saying that so and so was coming to give a concert and so we'd tell our walking wounded that that, you know, that was on, or they'd find out themselves and they'd go along and listen to it. There was one well known French entertainer one year, a fabulous, sort of, person. She was well known, I've forgotten which one she was, but she gave a fabulous concert. And then there were pictures.

How regular were they?

I'm not too sure who organised these. Some sort of, um, oh dear, turn it off for a while and I'll talk to you

No. We were just trying to work out here the names of the entertainment units, but I think we can leave it at that. Just talking about other social things for a moment. In those photographs we just had a look at there were some rather nice ones of various beach parties at Gaza. Was that common? Or was that a rare event?

(15.00)No, that was pretty good really because we usually had a bus that would take us into Gaza either to shop ... and they had a little officers' club there that we could go and have dinner with ... anyone holding officers' rank could go in. And sometimes, you know, a walking patient would go with you. But very often when we were off duty, we would go in either by ... if our friends had a staff car, we would go in in that but otherwise we would go in by bus and we'd go right through the little village and to the shores of the Mediterranean and there was really a nice, sort of, sandy beach there and we'd often have very nice parties there.

And that's really quite a ...

Swimming parties.

... regular thing?

Oh, yes, yes. And we had a bit of tennis, too. In our off time. I've forgotten where they were but somehow or other they'd been laid down on the Gaza Ridge [inaudible].

Christmas at Jerusalem, I know it was a white Christmas, I think the first Christmas you had there.

Yes, I think so.

What's your recollection of that, your Christmas time there?

Yes. Well, wait a minute. You'd better turn it off again. You'd have to get that from Marjorie, I think.

Right, okay, we'll go over that.

[inaudible]

Well, one very important event that we cannot gloss over that happened at Mount Scopus is that you became engaged.

Yes, that's right.

How did all that begin?

Well we got to know each other and we used to go out a bit together when ... and then Ralph was, sort of, seconded from the 6th AGH and went to ... I think he's told you. He went to work with ... became a 'daddums'* or a 'diddems' or a 'daddums', or something. And then he went to staff school but he was still round about, you see. And we used to go to Jerusalem on days off, or Tel Aviv, or something like that. And eventually, I think he was probably at the staff school when we were up on Mount Scopus and he used to come visiting there, and we went out into the garden one day and got ourselves engaged.

That sounds lovely.

Overlooking Mount ... the Dead Sea, the Mountains of Moab.

You could hardly ask for a more romantic setting.

* D.A.D.M.S. colloq. for Deputy Assistant Director of Medical Services.

It was very romantic.

Was that common? How many other nurses to your general knowledge did become permanently involved with officers or men of the hospital?

Oh. Well. With officers of the hospital. I don't think many did. I can't just remember. We had marriages but not, you know. And two of our girls got married over there. One married a Palestinian policeman when that was such and he was stationed at Gaza, and she married him. I think she was the 2/1st actually, not the 2/6th. Then there was another one who got married over there on Gaza Ridge and she married an officer but, you know, out of one of the battalions, or regiments, or something, I can't just remember.

Right. So it was fairly unusual. Having become engaged, did that at all affect I know later when you were married you had to leave the army, but just becoming engaged, did that at all affect your official status in the unit, or not?

No. No.

Right. Well are there any other memories out of that particular time?

What up on Mount Scopus?

Well, no, actually

Well, you see, Ralph had to go back to Tel Aviv. We just, sort of, saw about as much of each other and went out about as often as we had been going before. It was And then he went back to Australia about a year before we did. Because we stayed on with the 9th Division in Gaza Ridge. We were the only hospital on it, at that stage. The only base hospital left there.

Becoming engaged, did that at all alter your perspective on the war?

Not so much then as when I got married because contrary to what you said then, you couldn't leave the army unless you were pregnant after marriage. And much as you were more interested in being Mrs Cameron than Sister Cameron, this didn't happen and so in the end, well, I stayed on at Concord and then because Ralph was up in Queensland and, you know, could down to Brisbane for days off, I got a transfer to Greenslopes and we saw a bit of each other then. But then they eventually brought in something where, if you were married and had been in the army a certain number of years, you could if you wanted to resign, or get out. So that's how I left the army.

Oh, I see. Well, just going back to the Middle East, stepping back into that. Was it during, I think, the 1st Gaza Regiment period and then Mount

Scopus that the Syrian campaigns and ... was fought and then the later, the second time at Gaza Ridge, the El Alamein campaign? Do you remember those periods as being particularly busy and difficult, or not? How did that affect you?

During the campaigns, do you mean, or in between?

During them.

(20.00) Well, we had to wait, but eventually we became very busy because, you see, it comes back through the RAPs to the field ambulances to the CCSs and eventually back to the general hospital. So it was waiting for that to happen and then we were ... you know, if they knew that a convoy of badly wounded people was coming back to us, coming up from the Suez or somewhere we would all be called out and, you know, no matter what, any hour of the day or night.

How well organised were the convoys in terms of men at Casualty Clearing Stations or further up the line, having been already designated to go to certain wards when they arrived at the base hospital? In other words how smoothly and how quickly did they ...?

I really can't tell you about that because that was all men and we didn't handle any of that at all. Nor did we know how it happened really. We just knew that convoys arrived and we received them and looked after them, perhaps Ralph could tell you more about that.

Right. The issue of men who'd been very severely wounded, either, sort of, severe gunshot wounds, explosions, burns, that kind of thing that no doubt in some cases were fairly horrific. How did you, nurses generally, cope with that kind of trauma?

Well, as regards burns we had a definite, sort of, skin ward where burns were treated ... and so on and we had a specialist skin officer, you know, medical officer, and we had our specialist physicians and surgeons and so on. So that they all had their departments and they were looked after well. You know, we had a very well established hospital on Gaza Ridge. And then, eventually, if they were pretty intractable and weren't, sort of, improving at all they were eventually invalided back to Australia quite often. Not very many but some of them had to be.

Right. Beyond those details of the medical situation of how they were handled medically, how did nurses, perhaps yourself, cope with the emotional aspect of dealing with these generally young men who'd been severely mauled?

Yes. Well, it was very tragic really to see them and you just had to be ... you had to, sort of, switch off in a way, you know, and just get on with the bare facts of the thing and do

your best for them. They themselves were tremendously brave, I think. There weren't many who, sort of, were sort of, bowed down under it, you know - they had a tremendous spirit. They used to worry about their wives and their families back home and you'd deal with that as best you could. And perhaps Although the Red Cross officer usually wrote any letters for them and that sort of thing, but sometimes you were asked to. And when they came in and they were really, sort of, being received and dealt with, there wasn't much time for any of that, but later on you got to talk to them and find out how they felt and so on, tried to bolster them a bit. But most of them were pretty good.

I understand that some of the priests and I think notably a Catholic priest called, I think, Father Burke was very conscious of their welfare?

Yes. He was very good, yes. He was a nice little man, Peter Burke.

'Pitter Patter'.

Mm.

Pitter Patter, I've heard him called.

Pitter Patter? Yes, I think that's right.

There obviously were cases where men had, for whatever reason, been through appalling situations and had cracked psychologically in, you know, manifesting itself in different ways. How were those men dealt with and how much was there real understanding of their situation?

Oh, I think there was a good understanding by the medical officers who looked after them, you know. And really they had all the, sort of, the dealing with them, the talking with them and trying to sort them out. All we did was literally their nursing care and so on. We didn't try to, sort of, sort them out ourselves. Well, I don't think we did, really. We just carried on with the officers' orders.

(25.00) Do you think nurses, being women, with women's points of view and just female attitudes as against male attitudes, do they have a different, more understanding, view towards those men, or not?

Well, perhaps so. And that wouldn't necessarily be psychological cases, really always. I suppose, we perhaps had a softer approach. I can remember some officers being really tough with their surgical patients, you know. Having a look at their wounds and having some of the men nearly leaping out of bed, you know, because But by and large ... they were just the exceptions, I think. By and large it was pretty good.

Right. Just finally on this issue of wounds and trauma. I'd imagine for men who lost limbs, perhaps specifically legs, it must have been an

appalling discovery and perhaps something that was discovered after coming out of surgery and so on.

Yes.

Did you ever have to cope with that kind of situation of actually telling them ...?

Well, not so much really because I just occasionally did duty, you know, filling in as a, sort of, reserve if someone was off sick or something, but mostly I treated medical cases and nursed medical cases. But you'd see a whole ward full of these thighs, you know, strapped up or in an extension or something and But I never actually was in charge or nursed one of those wards.

What about amongst the nurses themselves? I'd imagine both ... at the periods of greatest stress with these major campaigns ... both the physical demands of very constant work and some of these emotional aspects must have at times been become very, very wearing. What support did nurses have amongst themselves? How did they help one another?

Well, the ones that I were with seemed to cope with it very well, really. I mean we were all distressed for the men - the boys - as we used to call them. And we would talk to them as much as we could and sort of bolster them up. But when we were off duty, well, I guess we ... well, we just had a lot of fun amongst ourselves. We had our own mess to sit in, you know, where we could, sort of, talk or play cards or something after our evening meal. But And there were always letters to write home and that sort of thing. I don't think that very many of us got very down. I can't remember anyone in our unit, that I was associated with who let it get them down.

Letters from home must have been a great delight.

Oh, they were wonderful, of course, yes, wonderful. and you could sit out, when there was a full moon you could sit outside your room, you know, just under the great starry sky and read your letter by moonlight it was so bright.

[inaudible] Well, going on a little bit, I do know that you have a particularly vivid memory towards the end of the divisional parade, that must have been quite a climactic moment. Could you tell us about that?

Yes, that was wonderful really. It was after the 'big push' was over and our division, 9th Division, had been pulled out and were returning home. Everyone knew that they were leaving the Middle East, and so we were too, and we were busily - we knew we were moving but no-one would tell us when, we just had to, sort of, live from day to day. But the word came round that anyone who was off duty and would like to go, and they advised us to go, could be taken down to watch this divisional parade in front of Sir

Leslie Morshead, I think it would have been, wouldn't it? And we thought, oh, what's this divisional parade - just another thing, you know. We really didn't realise how marvellous it was and how infrequently it happened. So

Could I just pause here?

Yes.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

Identification: This is Edward Stokes with Mrs Cameron, 2/6th, Tape 2, Side 2.

So we thought, well someone really told us that we shouldn't miss it. If we possibly could get there we should go, so we went, still not realising how marvellous it would be. And we were taken down below Gaza Ridge down in the desert somewhere, where there was a good flat open space and we were given a good advantage, vantage point and I've forgotten now how wide the lines were, you know, how many men kept in line and marched past. There must have been about thirty, forty, I don't know, more. And they just kept on coming and coming and all the orders were, sort of, sent down from, or sent up, you know, from one to ... you don't ... it was so amazing to us to hear all these orders before the thing actually took place, you know, or it was sent down from the highest offer down, down, down, down through the brigades, through the battalions and so on until everything happened. And there they all were, our boys who'd been in the desert parading before ... it was really very moving and very, very ... I don't know, words fail me. I can always remember, I can still see it, it was marvellous.

I can imagine it. I have actually seen a photograph of that parade. I forget where but it was very striking.

Yes.

Well, the news finally came to go home, I suppose particularly in your case, given that your husband-to-be had preceded you, this was good news.

Yes. Yes, it was.

Did you have much time to pack up, to get going, or was it fairly rapid?

Yes, I think so. I can't remember any great rush and mad toodley-doo, you know, about the whole thing. It was well planned and just a matter of waiting for transport, I suppose, and ships and so on. We went down to Suez, I think, and waited there for quite a while. Can't remember how we went down. We must have gone by train, I think, rather than

through the canal. And there we waited at Suez until we finally went on board something or other and away we went.

(5.00) Do you have any particular memories of the journey back?

No, not really, except that when we got close to Australia and the Japanese, of course, were in the war at this stage, there was an alarm went round that we were not to undress when ... it was the last night on board before we got to Perth, I think. And we were told not to undress but just to lie in our bunks and sleep, in case there was an alarm.

Did you have regular boat drills, that sort of thing?

Yes, always that. Excuse me, I'm getting dry now.

Just a moment. [inaudible] This is just a story about that last night at sea.

Well, we were sitting having coffee with some friends, officer friends and they told me One of them said to me, 'I'll lend you a pair of my trousers, you're not to go to sleep in your skirt. If we do have to abandon ship the trousers will be a great deal easier to cope with.' Of course, later on when the nurses went to the tropics, they were always in trousers. But we ... it was still ... just wore skirts everywhere in those days.

Yes, certainly a lot more practical. Well, coming back to Australia, Mrs Cameron, besides perhaps, you know, obvious personal things with your fiance and family and so on, were there differences that you noticed? Had the country changed while you'd been away, or not?

Yes. It was overrun with Yanks which we didn't like. And then when we really sat down to think about it, we thought that then probably we were feeling as the Palestinians must have felt with us - overrunning them. But before that our first and immediate thing was a great deal of resentment, which was silly. It was just a passing thing but it was an immediate, sort of, reaction.

Yes, it's very understandable. You were outnumbered in your own country.

Yes.

Well, was that resentment, was it just that they were outsiders within your own country, or was it based on things such as their high spending power and American troops ...?

I think it probably was their high spending power and their ability to, sort of, entertain. Whereas our boys, perhaps couldn't and didn't have the money and, you know. And a general feeling that they'd taken over our country. [laughs]

Which if you look at the McDonald shops around the country [inaudible]
....

Yes. But as I said, you know, it was a passing thing. After, when you really, sort of, got down to thinking about it, you thought, well, how ridiculous, of course they must be here.

Mm. It's better in the end to be able to overtake them than the Japanese army.

Yes.

Well

Also, we had to ... we were made, once we got back, we were made to change our shiny nickel buttons on our pips for gun-metal ones, in case the enemy saw us. And we felt, well, for heaven's sake, we've been wandering round in the Middle East in amongst everything, you know, with these buttons, so we resented that a bit, too.

It seems a, sort of, piece of nightmarish bureaucracy.

Yes.

I wonder how long somebody took to make that decision. Well, going on, the hospital, of course, after leave and so on, went up to Rocky Creek. I think you did spend some time there, didn't you?

Well, of course, we had home leave as soon as we got back and I had to get back to the country to see my people, to a little place called Taralga outside Goulburn. And I couldn't wait, I took the paper train home, I should have waited for the next morning to ... an ordinary passenger train, but I came up on the paper train and then, of course, there wasn't a bus to meet me and I hadn't, sort of, said to ... I wanted it to be a surprise for my parents. And so I hadn't told them so there was no car, no anything, and I thought, well, I'll just have to sit here on the station until something turns up, until I can get a taxi or something. And there was a medical officer on the train, too, and he was returning to ... I think there was a military hospital at Kenmore at that stage and he was on the staff there. And he came and spoke to me and I told him the situation and he said, 'Are you just back from the Middle East? Oh, hop in the car, I'll take you home.' So ... Kenmore was on the way but, you know, it was still many miles beyond Kenmore, but he drove me home all the way, and I arrived for breakfast the next morning much to everyone's delight and amazement. It was wonderful, yes, it was.

I'd imagine there was a lot of that fellow feeling in the war years, too. I mean the story of this lift with the officer

Oh, yes, oh, yes. So, yes, that was marvellous.

Well, after your time there with your family then did you go back to, up to the Atherton Tablelands?

(10.00) Well, no, I didn't because I was married. While we were on leave we got married, that's right. My husband, at that stage was up in Darwin and he managed to get leave and he came down and I was married on my home leave, during my home leave. And we had a very short honeymoon. You couldn't get very far in those days, I think we went down to Jervis Bay or somewhere. Anyway, then Ralph had to go back. I don't know whether he was going back to Darwin or back to Redbank, but anyway he had to go back - away, and I was based then at Concord. So I spent a while at Concord, nursing there and then when I found that he was going to be in Queensland a lot and within striking distance of Brisbane I arranged to have a transfer to Greenslopes. So we were able to then, sort of, get our days off together and have a little bit of time there.

Sure. And I think you were saying, correcting me before, that it was ... you actually left the army when you became pregnant, it was that not

No. I couldn't I tried to be pregnant but That was the only way you could after you got married for quite a while and then they brought it in because I still wasn't pregnant and I still wasn't terribly interested and I was at Greenslopes. But they brought in this thing where you could, if you had been in the army so many years, I've forgotten now what it was, and you were married ... so many years service and married.

Right. And so then

That you could if you wanted to, leave the army, so I resigned and retired.

And finished with the army.

Yes.

Just going back briefly, because I gather now it was after you came back to Australia from then on you had no contact with, or no working contact with 2/6th?

No, no.

From talking to other people, it does appear to have been an organisation that had great esprit de corps, perhaps flowing down from Colonel Money through And I get the impression of an organisation that had great loyalty and still does today. How did you feel breaking the ties with the hospital?

I hated it. I absolutely hated it. I resented it very much the fact that we were not ... married women were not allowed go north of some lateral thing which was near Rockhampton, one ... sub-tropical

Oh, that was the reason why you didn't go to [inaudible]

Yes. You couldn't ...

So having married

... even go up to the, you know, up on the. you know, Queensland.

Atherton Tablelands.

The Atherton Tablelands.

I suppose the theory being that that was a potentially dangerous area.

I don't know. It was all part of the, sort of, shiny pips and all that sort of nonsense, you know, anyway.

Perhaps of men being too solicitous about women's welfare.

Oh, I don't know. [laughs]

Yes. Somewhat chauvinistic.

It seems silly after being through the Middle East.

Mm. Sure. So anyway, there were real regrets?

Oh, yes, very much so. I hated leaving my unit but we kept in contact, you know, afterwards. Just turn it off for a while.

Right. Well, that's been very, very interesting, Mrs Cameron. I just thought perhaps ... a penultimate question. Looking back on it all, your experience in the war, the Middle East in particular, had you changed as a person through it all? How had it affected you?

I suppose it made me think more deeply of a lot of things I hadn't worried about before. Um. It was the first time I'd ever been abroad. It wasn't a very good experience because it was war time but that in itself, sort of, broadens your outlook on the whole of life, I think, seeing how other races and people live. Um. Apart from that I think much the same, you know, you just

Just to end. Mrs Cameron on behalf of the War Memorial, thank you very much for making this tape.

Oh, well, thank you for bearing with the story.

It's a good one.

END TAPE 2, SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW